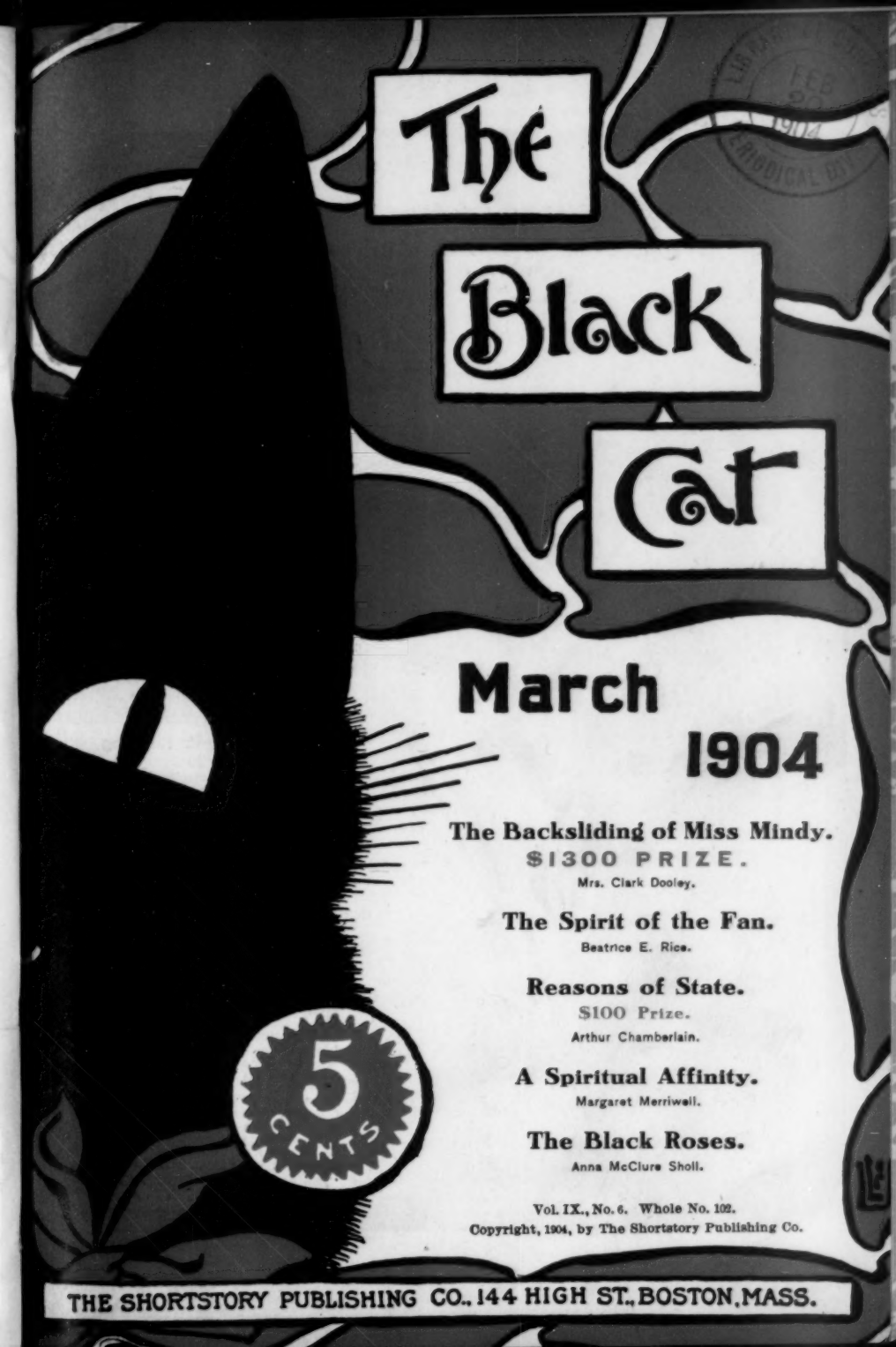

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The Backsliding of Miss Mindy.*

BY MRS. CLARK DOOLEY.

"SISTER BAKER will lead us in prayer," announced the preacher's wife, and the members of the Fairview South Methodist Sewing Circle knelt down before their respective chairs, and moved painfully and uneasily from knee to knee while Sister Baker, a short, stout person, with a most astonishingly deep voice, proceeded to give the Lord explicit information concerning the affairs and financial limitations of the Circle, closing with fervent supplications for each individual sister that she might never depart from the strait and narrow way, and earnestly petitioning that none of the members of this devoted band would ever, however innocently, be the means of causing a weaker brother or sister to offend.

With a smothered sigh of relief the good sisters heard her stentorian "Amen," and scrambled to their feet, stepping on their dresses, and noisily dropping scissors and thimbles as they did so.

Timid Sister Gaylord, gathering up her apronful of carpet rags, tiptoed over to the preacher's wife, who was President, and anxiously whispered in her ear, while the Circle sat in solemn silence.

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* The writer of this story received the automobile prize in THE BLACK CAT story contest ending February 26, 1902.

"I think, as the idea is yours, Sister Gaylord, you should put it before the Circle yourself," said the preacher's wife — a cheerful soul, to whom parliamentary rules were as manna in the wilderness.

"Oh, *no!*" gasped Sister Gaylord, in terror. "I wouldn't so much mind jest settin' in my chair and *tellin'* you all about it, but when I hev to stan' up and "second" things, and "move" 'em, and call you Mrs. President, I'm scared plumb stiff, and I feel like I never seen none of you before. You tell, Sister Allen; you don't mind speakin' out."

Sister Gaylord's face, with its surprised eyebrows and irresolute mouth, assumed an expression of devout thankfulness as the preacher's wife assented smilingly to the whispered appeal, and proceeded, to the admiration of the sisters, to lay before the Circle, in the most approved manner, the fact that the two Misses Brown had no heating stove in their tiny house, and had been obliged to sit by their kitchen fire all the bitter winter; that a good stove was for sale at the hardware store for five dollars, and that just that sum to the credit of the Circle was in the bank; and the President demanded a vote as to whether or no this money should be used for this purchase.

"We all know," continued the cheery President, "that the Misses Brown are worthy souls who have seen better days, and who are forced to be somewhat dependent on charity during the winter, when both suffer severely from rheumatism. This kindly plan of providing for their comfort next winter originated not with me, I regret to say, but with Sister Gaylord. The question is now open for discussion."

This last remark sufficed to throw the entire Circle into a cold perspiration, as each sister racked her brains to remember the correct parliamentary language in which to express her opinion.

Silence reigned, broken only by the sound of falling scissors or spools, which, in accordance with the natural perversity of such articles as the last named, invariably rolled under the organ or bed, and were only fished out with much exertion and the broom by flushed and exasperated owners. Several sisters hitched uneasily on their chairs, but no one spoke, until the President,

taking in the situation, came to the rescue, and announced that the question was before the meeting for informal discussion.

The effect was magical. Each sister dropped her work, opened her mouth, and began to talk at one and the same moment, and this is what they said: —

"That there stove aint worth over four — . . . Mindy told me she like to froze last winter — . . . Costs a heap to run two fires — . . . Only two rooms in their house — . . . Seems like one stove would heat — . . . Took all the Circle's money last winter to buy wood for one — . . . Susan Brown is a good, industrious soul, but Mindy is too sot in her way and uppish — . . . Behind with the furren missionary money — . . . Charity begins at home — . . . Mindy don't mean a thing by her queer ways — . . . Bought a percale gown for twelve cents when them as went without theirselves and give to her had to wear five-cent caliker — . . . Mighty improvident and wasteful — . . . Good hands in sickness when they 's well theirselves — . . . A shame for two good souls like them to be cold nights — . . . Wood only a dollar a cord — . . . And with their rheumatism, no wonder they can't work much cold days — . . . Five dollars is a good deal to spend — . . . Hope they 'll appreciate their blessings — . . . Always did have my suspicions about Mindy's orthodoxy — . . . Susan allers does what Mindy tells her — . . . Comin' warm weather, and they won't need no heatin' stove till fall — . . . Stove might be gone by then, or the money used up — . . . Mindy 's so highfalutin' 'bout things as is give her — . . . Hes cake and fresh meat oftener 'an I can — . . . Takes poor folks to be wasteful — . . . Seen better days, and are good souls — . . . Mebby the man would knock off fifty cents, seein' it 's fer charity — . . ."

The President, slightly disturbed, rapped smartly for order, and, awestruck and guilty, silence fell upon the Circle as they realized they would have to vote upon the subject and had forgotten what they must do, and certain nervous sisters felt cold and creeping sensations in the region of their spines, and secretly wondered how on earth congressmen and representatives could go through with such business day in and day out and seem to like it.

"The vote will be by ballot," announced the President, and a hurried scramble for paper, followed by a frantic search for a pencil, unearthed a short stub, minus any point whatever, but speedily whittled into the semblance of one with a case knife, and the ballot was at length taken, the "ayes" being nine to the "noes" five.

After the adjournment of the meeting, the fourteen determined women filed in a procession down to the hardware store to assist in the purchase of the stove, and to jew the hardware man down fifty cents, beside throwing in a poker and two lengths of pipe, all of which they triumphantly accomplished.

A committee of the ladies, armed with stove legs and pipe wrapped in paper, and accompanied by the resigned hardware man, who abjectly trundled the stove in a wheelbarrow, having been bullied into delivering it and putting it up, marched in imposing array to the tiny house where the Misses Brown lived, and assisted at the final ceremonies.

Singly and collectively, they gave their opinions as to which way the stove should set; singly and collectively, they instructed the man about putting up the pipe; and singly and collectively, they afterwards mentioned, with raised eyebrows and bated breath, the word he whispered when the pipe wouldn't fit and slipped and jammed his fingers.

"It 's mighty fine to hev such a heater, ain't it, Mindy?" ventured Miss Susan Brown, eyeing her sister uncertainly, as the two women put their little house in order after the invaders had left.

"I reckon so," snapped Miss Mindy, putting the chairs in their places with a vigorous thump, "but it looks to me that screens to keep these here pesky flies out would be a heap more to the purpose in June than a heater. Not but what it 's kind of them, of course, an' mebby we 'll git the screens for Christmas. No; I s'pose it ain't Christianlike to talk that-a-way," she continued, in answer to her sister's mild remonstance; "but it does make me plumb hot to hev Eliza Goodrich an' Sarah Snow come here givin' us stoves in charity, when every one in the hull town knows thet we 're poor as Job's turkey to-day because *our* pa went on *their* pa's note, an' hed it to pay, an' give up all he hed to do it, an' then they come a-patronizin' us! It 's too much!"

"It 'll be fine to hev it though when it 's cold," ventured Miss Susan, timidly.

"It would be fine to hev an ice-cream freezer now that it 's hot," retorted Miss Mindy, "or a new bunnit fer meetin', or a gown that ain't walked the streets on someun else's back a hull year afore we git it, or to hev what vittles we want to eat 'ithout folks thinkin' we 's 'stravagant, or to go some'ers to do somethin' lively an' enjoy ourselves onct in a way, an' not be told we 's sinful an' bound for hell two-forty on the plank road! We ain't neither of us hed no real pleasure in our hull lives, an' you know it, Susan Brown. We 've been starved to death all our born days. When we 's girls, ef we came to meetin' fixed up pretty like young girls orter be, the preacher couldn't hardly wait fer service to begin so 's he could rant an' r'ar 'bout the sinfulness an' vanity of folks that dressed up! Jes' as if any right-minded woman couldn't come a heap nearer bein' an angel if she knowed her gown fit an' her hat 'as in style! Ef we went to a play-party, we was giddy an' no-count, and Ma cried, and Pa caved, an' the town nearly hed fits! I ain't never told you, Susan, but Jim Bowen asked me onct to go to a dance over to his aunt's, an' I come mighty near goin'."

"Mindy Brown!" gasped her sister, who all through this tirade had sat with her mouth open, in helpless astonishment.

"Yes, I did," snapped Mindy; "an', what's more, I 'm sorry I didn't, an' I 've been sorry ever since, for that 's what we quarreled about, an' I ain't never heard tell of him after that night, for he went to Californy next day. I don't believe in no such strait-laced nonsense, and I ain't agoin' to stand it no longer. I can't find no place in the Bible where it says everything folks wants to do is wicked, an' I jes' believe the preachers make it up out o' hull cloth, so 's to hev somethin' to r'ar about! What good 's it done, I 'd like to know?" she demanded fiercely, a red spot beginning to burn in each cheek. "What good 's it done? We 's old, an' poor, an' alone, an' we 're snubbed for everything we *do* do. As long as I live I 'll never fergive Pa fer not takin' us to that circus that come when we 's children; you 's eleven, an' I 's twelve. I never *did* want to see anything as bad as that, an' he made us learn two hull pages of the Bible by heart jes' fer wantin'

to go, an' the preacher he hed conniption fits fer a month or more jes' because ef his members *didn't* go, he suspicioned they wanted to, anyhow, an' I bet they did, too, an' him worst of all, so now! Don't you look pious at me, Susan Brown, or I 'll come over there and slap you. You wanted to go as bad as I did, an' you know it, an' ef we 'd hed the sperrit of chickens we 'd jes' took our money an' went an' seen it, and let 'em cave afterwards! They couldn't hev made no more fuss than they did, an' we'd a-hed that to remember all our born days; an' ef ever there comes another circus to this here place I 'm a-goin' an' so are you, ef we hev to sell that there stove to git there, an' ef folks go to cuttin' up, I 'll tell 'em I 'll settle that with the Lord myself, an' they needn't worry, an' I 've an idee He 'll be a heap more reasonable about it than the preacher will, too. I don't believe He took all the trouble to make a world and folks to live in it, an' it full of pretty things, jes' to go an' send 'em to hell for admirin' 'em an' a wantin' to be cheerful an' enjoy life. I 'm plumb wore out a-trottin' to meetin' to tell the Lord I 'm a sinner. Ef He can't remember it by this time, I ain't a-goin' to tell Him no more. I'm a-goin' to backslide an' git a little fun out o' life. Stop your cryin', Susan Brown; you 're a-goin' to backslide yourself, so you might as well hush."

"What — what you goin' to do, Mindy?" queried the terrified and tearful Miss Susan, wiping her eyes on the tail of her gown in lieu of her misplaced handkerchief.

"I 'm going' to be a lost sheep," declared Miss Mindy, firmly, "an' so are you! Folks are always tickled half to death when a real out an' out sinner gits saved, an' the Bible says there is more rejoicing in heaven over a lost sheep than over a heap o' well-behaved ones, so I 'm goin' to be one an' see how it works, an' so are you!"

"What — what will we do?" faltered Miss Susan, helplessly, well-knowing that where Miss Mindy led she must follow.

"*Do*," snorted Miss Mindy, "*do!* We 're a-goin' to do every blessed thing we 's never allowed to do. We 's goin' to set up till twelve o'clock to-night, an' lay abed till nine in the morning', an' then we 'll take our dinner an' the coffee pot, an' go over to the creek, an' spend the day, an' — yes — we 'll fish!"

"Oh, Mindy," wailed Miss Susan, "to-morrow 's Sunday!"

"I reckon I know it, Susan Brown. That 's why I 'm doin' it. All my life I 've jes' *ached* to go fishin' on Sunday, jes' because it 's wicked, an' to-morry we 're goin'!"

"I 'll be 'shamed to walk into meetin' at night," sobbed Miss Susan. "Oh, Mindy, what 'll ever become of us?"

"You ain't goin' to meetin' to-morry night, nor to prayer-meetin' on Wednesday neither, so quit fussin' about that. *Where* we 're goin' to, the good Lord knows, an' nobody else, so hush up. To be a lost sheep, you 've got to cut didoes, an' we 're a-goin' to cut 'em," she concluded tersely, beginning to turn over some things in an old trunk.

Presently she laid before the horrified Miss Susan a box of cigarettes, long kept to smoke her plants, and a small square packet.

Going over to the clock shelf, she took down a pint bottle of whiskey, left by a neighbor during Miss Susan's last sickness, and which the temperance principles of the two sisters had forbidden them to use, and from the family purse she shook half a dozen pennies, all of which she deposited on the table, together with matches, sugar, glasses, and a cup of hot water.

"We 're a-goin' to smoke, an' drink, an' gamble, an' swear," she announced, pulling down the curtains and locking the door.

"But I don't know how," gasped Miss Susan.

"No more do I," said her sister, grimly; "but I reckon we 're a-goin' to learn," and she unwrapped the small packet and displayed to Miss Susan's horrified eyes a pack of playing cards.

"I took 'em away from Jim onct, an' I 've hed 'em ever since," said Miss Mindy, sternly. "Mebby ef I hedn't been so strait-laced about such things, I 'd been a happy wife, 'stid o' bein' a lonely ole maid," she said, as she mixed two glasses of toddy and put a match and a cigarette before her helpless sister.

. . . . . .

It was fully nine o'clock on Sunday morning — the unaccustomed hour set by Miss Mindy for rising — before either of the sisters felt ready for breakfast.

"A good strong cup o' coffee 'll make us feel all right," said the younger, clearing the table of the evidences of the previous night's orgy.

An hour later, fortified by the strong coffee, and carrying a small basket of lunch which each was secretly sure she could never eat, the two sisters made their guilty way as fast as their weak and trembling limbs could take them, to the creek, where for several hours, feeling uncommonly like outlaws and desperadoes, they fished.

"It 's awful," moaned Miss Susan, gripping her rod with desperation, "two church members a-desecratin' the Sabbath so."

"You jes' wait tell the fish gits to bitin', an' I 'll bet two cents you 'll conclude that 's what the Lord made fish fer — to be catched whenever folks hez the time to catch 'em," observed Miss Mindy with suppressed excitement, as her cork began to bob up and down.

Presently, with a shriek, Miss Susan landed a fat perch, and then the fun began, and Miss Mindy, who was not afraid of angleworms, was kept busy baiting hooks.

Miss Susan's pale face was pink, her faded eyes bright and eager, and she ate her lunch, rod in hand, unable to tear herself away from the fascinating sport, for never had fish in Fair Creek bitten as they did that Sunday afternoon, and the two sinners, regardless of time, fished until sunset.

"It 'll be plumb dark before we git home," said Miss Mindy, as she counted the fish.

"I don't care," said Miss Susan, valiantly, "I ain't never hed so much fun since I 's a girl. Oh, *land*, Mindy!" suddenly collapsing. "Folks 'll be goin' to church an' see us."

But fortune favored them, and they managed to reach home unseen, though not without several scares, and crept to bed, leaving the tea-things unwashed, a sin second only to robbery in Fairview.

Monday the backsliders had little time for orgies, both of them being busily engaged on a dress for Sister Snow, and, in fact, their only dissipation that week consisted in *not* going to prayer-meeting, and receiving a call from the preacher to inquire into their absence.

"Did you tell him you was a-settin' on the creek bank a-haulin' in fish hand over fist Sunday?" asked Miss Mindy, who was out when the reverend gentleman called.

"N — no," faltered Miss Susan, guiltily; "I said we wa'n't feelin' well, an' that we went to the country."

"You 're a-comin' on, Sukey," said Miss Mindy, encouragingly. "Two more toots like that one an' you 'll be the wooliest kind of a lost sheep. Did you tell him your health necessitated your spendin' next Sunday in the country, too?"

"I said as mebby we might go," admitted Miss Susan, timidly, while Miss Mindy shrieked with laughter.

But Sunday it rained, and the two ladies were, from sheer lonesomeness, forced to trot meekly to church, but somehow Miss Susan found her attention wandering, and Miss Mindy nearly disgraced herself by whispering that folks said fish bit well in the rain.

It was the next day that the advance agent came to the staid little town, and threw it into an agony of excitement by posting amazing bills of smiling ladies in abbreviated skirts, posed on the backs of fiery steeds jumping hurdles, wonderful acrobats, trained dogs, performing elephants and ponies, marvelous wild beasts, and writhing serpents; in fact, all the attractions and distractions of an up-to-date circus, the like of which proper little Fairview had never before seen.

Miss Mindy came home with a grim expression and a handbill that night. The expression she got in an interview with Sister Snow, who owed her three dollars for sewing and who could not pay her, as she needed the money for new trimmings for a bonnet; the other she picked up on the street, and the grim expression deepened as she read of the delights in store for those who had the requisite shekels to deposit with the doorkeeper.

Presently she sat down with a pencil and paper and began to figure, talking softly to herself as she did so: —

"Two 25 cents to git in — that 's 50; we don't need no reserved seat. Three side shows at 10 make 60; 50 and 60 's $1.10. Then peanuts, lemonade, an' chewin' gum — I 'm a goin' to have the hull shootin' match ef I die fer it — that 's 30 more — $1.40, an' say 10 for extrys — $1.50. Then twenty yards o' 5-cent lawn makes $1.00 — $2.50 — an' them two shapes is 25 cents each — $3.00. That leaves $1.00 fer trimmin's. I 'll do it."

"Do what, Mindy?" asked Miss Susan, in some trepidation.

"Sell the stove like I said I would, an' git us new bunnits an'

dresses, an' go to the circus," announced that lady, getting up briskly and tying on the old Shaker that had done duty for so many years.

"What will the Circle say," gasped Miss Susan; "an' the preacher, an' — an' folks?"

"Jes' what they politely please," snapped Miss Mindy; "an' much good may it do 'em. Go to that circus I will, an' hev a new gown an' bunnit, too, an' Dave Smith 'll give me four dollars for the stove, an' let me buy it back at that ef I can. You look out our patterns whilst I go git the stuff. We 'll hev to work like a house afire to git ready by day after to-morry, for I 'm goin' to see the hull show."

An hour later, Miss Susan sat in rapt silence while her sister displayed before her admiring eyes two patterns of cheap black-and-white lawn, two simple white straw bonnets with ribbon to trim, and $1.50 in shining coin, all to be spent in one day of riotous dissipation.

Busily the two ladies stitched and gathered and fitted the next day, and at ten that night the two dresses hung on a chair ready to put on, while two little straw bonnets, adorned with precise bows of ribbon, which looked as if nailed to position, rested chastely upon the machine.

"I 'm a-goin' to curl my hair, Susan Brown, an' so be you," announced Miss Mindy before retiring, and Miss Susan, her simple soul in a flutter of delight over her new finery, made no objection, and for the first time in twenty years the foreheads of the two Misses Brown bristled with curl-papers, forcing them to sleep upon their backs, and giving them bad dreams in consequence.

The morning dawned bright and warm, and, after a lengthy and careful toilet, the two sisters sallied forth to see the procession. Many were the curious and calculating glances cast at their new and giddy raiment, and incredulous stares were bestowed upon the soft waves of brown hair which softened their worn faces, and made them, with the faint color excitement brought to their cheeks, astonishingly young and good to look at.

It was curious to note how all the sisters of the Circle, and even the preacher himself, had found it necessary to purchase groceries and dry-goods on the very street and at the precise time

the glittering procession passed, though Sister Snow confided to Sister Gaylord that it would take three weeks of protracted meetings to straighten out the sinners after such a show, and the Reverend Joseph Lumly calculated that the publicans and sinners who ran the circus would carry away with them many times the sum he raised every year with so much difficulty for the heathen.

The smallest, raggedest, and baddest little boy in town did not eat less dinner, or climb more expectantly to a hard seat any earlier than Miss Mindy and Miss Susan, who, with their curiosity sated a trifle by the side shows, and their laps full of bags of peanuts and popcorn, blissfully chewed gum, and looked with all their eager eyes in a perfect flutter of enjoyment.

Why try to tell of the delights, the glories of that day? Of the gauzy ladies who — truth to tell — somewhat scandalized Miss Susan by the briefness of their skirts, and Miss Mindy by the absence of sleeves and tucker, but who smilingly jumped long-tailed horses over hurdles, or made them waltz to a fascinating air, played by a wonderful band, glittering in red and gold.

Of adorable little fat ponies who trotted briskly in to do all sorts of astonishing things no staid Fairview horse ever dreamed of doing, and who shook their silver bells, fluttered their blue ribbons, and flirted their wavy tails in a manner decidedly citified and distracting. Of grotesque elephants who ponderously lumbered through many clever and amusing tricks, or of the smart little dogs who seemed to know how to do everything but talk.

How they laughed till they cried at the clown! How shocked they were when he fell from his horse and lay motionless on the ground, and how astonished and relieved they were when he jumped up and snapped his fingers and showed he was only fooling! In short, how the two poor souls crowded into one brief afternoon more real pleasure than they had known in twenty years; so oblivious of all surroundings that they paid no attention to a sunburned, middle-aged man who sat near, and who never took his eyes from Miss Mindy's flushed, delighted face.

It was not till the sisters, still in a blissful dream, turned in at their own gate that they realized that the man was close behind them, and Miss Mindy was about to latch the gate when he said very softly, "Minnie, don't you know me?"

With a cry, Miss Mindy turned and ran to him and caught his outstretched hands, to the horror of Sister Snow, who was passing by.

In all Miss Mindy's life no one but Jim Bowen had ever called her Minnie, and no one but Jim Bowen had ever touched her faithful heart, though several worthy brothers in the church had tried.

Therefore, Miss Mindy, drawing him into the house and closing the door in Sister Snow's face, allowed the sunburned gentleman to take her in his arms and kiss her repeatedly, right before the petrified Miss Susan. It is a matter of history, too, that Miss Mindy returned every single kiss with interest.

"You see, Minnie, I saw you and Sue when you come into the tent," said the sunburned gentleman as they sat down to supper, "and I knowed you at onct, spite of the fifteen years since we quit. I 'm a-travelin' with the show just now, in charge of the trick horses on the road, but I 've bought me a ranch in Arizony, and'll have it paid for next month. What do you say to goin' back with me then, Minnie, as Mrs. Bowen, an' raisin' real woolly sheep instead of bein' a lost one?" asked the gentleman, with a wink at Miss Susan, who had just confided to him the story of their backsliding.

"Of course, Sue goes too," he added hastily, seeing a look of blank dismay overspread that lady's face. "There 's a widower with three kids lives on the place next to mine, purty little things with yaller curls, an' no one to wash their faces, an' Sue can marry him, an' fix 'em up."

So he arranged it, to Miss Susan's great confusion, that when the circus train pulled out that night, the sunburned gentleman had Miss Mindy's promise to wed him that day month, and visions of the three neglected infants, with yellow curls, floated through Miss Susan's dreams all night.

. . . . . .

At the next meeting of the Circle the President was absent, and it was well, for if the assembled sisters had been obliged to voice all their sentiments and tell all their news according to parliamentary rules, they simply would have burst.

"She called me in, as large as life, an' handed me five dollars an' said she was much obliged, but she wouldn't need the stove

this winter, as she was goin' to be married an' move to Arizony, an' Susan with her. It does beat all how uppish some folks are when they gits on their feet. 'Twa'n't two weeks ago she was *glad* to git that stove, an' now she s thrown it away runnin' after a man as hasn't been near her for fifteen year."

"The preacher told me," supplemented another sister, "that when he called to remonstrate with Mindy for goin' to that circus she jes' laughed in his face, an' actually told him she'd thanked the Lord on her knees every night since that she *hed* went. Looks like if she wanted a man that bad she 'd a-took Deacon Smith and straightened out them seven younguns of his, when he asked her."

"Well, I hope she 'll be happy," ventured Sister Gaylord timidly, wishing to say something kindly, but afraid the others would not approve.

"You'd better," observed Sister Goodrich, acidly, "for you was the one that set us on to buyin' that heater for her, an' ef she hedn't hed it to sell she couldn't a-went to that circus. No one 'd 'a' bought any o' her ole furniture, so I think it 'd be more becomin' ef you led us in prayer beseechin' pardon fer causin' a sister to offend, 'stid o talkin' 'bout her bein' happy."

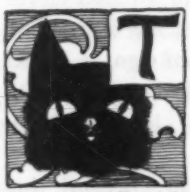
But Sister Gaylord, completely crushed by this rebuke, retired to her kitchen in tears, and the meeting broke up.

Kneeling beside her bed that night, Miss Mindy lifted up her grateful heart in thanks: —

"Oh, Lord," she whispered into the quilt, "that backslidin' done me more good than anything in my hull life, an' I thank Thee for understandin' an' not bearin' ill will towards me. I allers thought it was the preachers 'stid o' You that objected to folks enjoyin' theirselves, an' now I know it. You mustn't blame Susan a bit, fer she only did what I made her, an' I don't hanker after no more whiskey an' tobaccer, an' neither does she. Take care of all the folks that was good to us when we was poor an' alone, an' fergive us our trespasses as we fergive those that trespass agin us, an' thank You fer Jim, dear Lord. Amen."

The Spirit of the Fan.*

BY BEATRICE E. RICE.



HE fan had been sent to me, with a lacquered gong and a tiny jade elephant, from Nagasaki, Japan. It was of ordinary workmanship, with absolutely nothing about it to excite any unusual curiosity. The slender sticks were of cedar wood enameled black, and the upper section of stiff white paper, gilded on one side and decorated on the other with a small house, quite crooked as to outline and blurred as to coloring. Examining the fan more closely I was able to discern, apparently creeping from the doorway of this dwelling, a most villainous-looking individual, garbed in the dress of his country, girded about the waist with a brilliant red sash. The muscular body was slightly bent, and the clawlike fingers of the right hand clutched the hilt of a long, slender weapon, something like a dagger in shape, the sharp point steeped as though in blood, dark drops of which fell from the blade. My attention, however, was more especially attracted to what seemed to have been a freak of the artist's fancy or a piece of clear, sheer carelessness. One ear was entirely missing from the creature's ugly head, while the other one had been most prominently delineated.

"A crude enough bit of work," I thought, "yet what a world of fiendish deviltry has been depicted on that small painted countenance," for the black eyes slanted a look of most atrocious vindictiveness straight into mine, and I actually found myself shuddering as I gazed back into them. In the left-hand lower corner of the fan a few scarlet letters had been scrawled, which I took to be the painter's signature, now partially obliterated by a dark-colored splash.

As I, half-interestedly, let my eyes rest upon the rough yet picturesque sketching, I was of a sudden surprised into something

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akin to excitement. It might have been a trick of imagination, but I could have sworn, at the moment, that a faint light had appeared in one of the tiny windows of the crooked house. I rose and, going to the centre table, turned up the lamp to a brighter flame and, taking up a powerful magnifying glass that lay near at hand, I held it at a good focusing distance above the house, which at first seemed merely a daub of black and yellow with the wavering outlines accentuated by the strong glass, and just as I had arrived at the conclusion that a trick of vision had been at fault, and half closed the fan to lay it aside, again that will-o'-the-wisp of light signaled me, first at one window and then the other.

I hastily turned the flame of the lamp down until only a thread of gold ran along the wick-edge, and retreating to a far, shadowy corner of the library I looked again upon the fan, when, without doubt, the windows shone brilliantly and even seemed to widen until with little difficulty I could see the interior of the room. "Some trick of those clever little Japanese," I muttered to myself, and curiously turned the fan over to see if I could discover any concealed mechanism that would warrant the effect produced so strangely, but the back of the fan displayed only an expanse of dull gilt, relieved with one or two pink-billed herons, and luxuriant lotus blooms. I quickly turned the other side about and exclaimed aloud with astonishment.

Years ago, when a child at the seaside, I remember being taken to view a camera obscura, in which I had been able to recognize my playmates, apparently about an inch in height, moving around in their natural manner. My present sensation was much the same as I had experienced on that occasion, save that in this instance I seemed to be looking upon an exquisite bit of old Satsuma inspired with life.

Before my eyes a human being, perfectly formed, although greatly reduced in size, was moving here and there in the lighted room of the house on the fan. The small face resembled a wonderful piece of ivory carving as it rested against its dusky background of blue-black hair, waxed and folded, looped and coiled into an elaborate coiffure "a la Japonaise" and decorated gorgeously with gilded pins and creamy white japonica buds. A splash of gold accentuated the brilliant scarlet of the full under lip and

the transparent folds of a pink under-gown cast soft, rosy flushes against the white neck and throat, while the outer kimono of tenderest green and silver showed slashes of pearl color where the flowing sleeves fell open and back from the rounded arms. A wide "obis" of rose brocade encircled the waist broadly and was tied, or rather, padded against the back like a miniature knapsack while the small feet were encased in lacquered sandals.

I wondered vaguely if she was an "ok' san," of high degree or a favorite "geisha," but finally made up my mind that she must be a professional artist, for, after a few preliminary birdlike movements she drew the folds of her robes around her to her satisfaction and sank nimbly down amidst the twisting silver and green of her draperies, upon a square of figured "tatami" on the floor and began busily sorting fans of every variety of shape and kind, which she took from the papier-mâché box that stood beside her. After arranging an outlay of paints, brushes and saucers on a bamboo stool, she proceeded to work rapidly at decorating the fans spreading all around her, her tiny hands moving swiftly and deftly and her expression one of complete absorption in her work.

Presently, I saw her lean her head a little to one side and, placing one hand with palm slightly curved against her ear, listen attentively, and then, rising precipitously to her feet and scattering her gaily-colored fans far and wide, run quickly back of one of the paper partitions or screens that divided the room into sections. My curiosity had now become so intense that I felt I must not lose sight of her for even an instant and I found, much to my delight, that by holding the fan at a certain angle I could see her shadow quite plainly reflected against the screen.

Evidently her abrupt exit had been caused by the arrival of someone, whose dark reflection gave the impression of a tall, broad-shouldered man in uniform. The shadows advanced toward each other, lengthening, shortening, wavering, retreating, swaying and bowing as shadows will. Then the man held out his arms to the woman. Again and yet again he embraced her. Bending his head to hers, he imprinted a kiss upon her forehead. For a moment she stood with bowed head, as though receiving a benediction, her hands, held closely between his own, resting against his breast. After a time she gently withdrew one hand and slipping

it into the loose drapery of the pink kimono she drew out a small folded paper which she thrust into his fingers, closing them over it, and, carrying his hand to her lips, she kissed it repeatedly.

As I watched with breathless interest the little romance being enacted before me I was impressed with a feeling of foreboding evil and with an uncanny sensation such as is generally produced by the contiguity of an unseen presence. I shortly understood the reason of this feeling for at the furthermost end of the lighted room I saw the bamboo curtain swinging before the half-open door move gently to one side, almost imperceptibly, as though stirred by a summer wind. And then, creeping softly, softly, very stealthily beneath the curtain, came the creature from the outside of the house on the fan. With sinuous, snakelike motion he glided toward the partition that separated him from the other inmates of the room. With bent head he listened, listened, making at the same time frightful contortions of the face, and strange wicked gestures. I could have screamed aloud from very horror. How could I let the man and woman know they were being watched? I made an effort to rap upon the fan, but had my brain been stupified by the fumes of opium I could not have been more powerless to speak or move. It seemed as if I had been placed under some hypnotic spell and then summoned as a silent witness.

Cautiously he knelt beside the screen and drew from the bagging sleeve of his blouse the knife — long, thin-bladed and keen — but, as I did not fail to note, without the sickening stain on the point that had been there when my attention had first been called to his pictured presence. He tried the glittering edge along the end of his girdle, slitting it, as if by magic, at a touch, and then grinned hatefully.

That a tragedy, which I could in no wise prevent, was to take place before me I felt sure, yet dumbly prayed that someone might come, or some unforeseen happening might occur to betray the creature's presence before it was too late. His intention was evidently not to kill the lovers as they stood, nor yet to surprise them by a sudden onslaught, for he still crouched close to the partition, almost hidden by the owari jardinières holding the small cumquot trees, golden with their yellow fruit, the one hideous blot on the harmonious color scheme of the pretty room; watching, watching

and waiting until the man's shadow, slowly, reluctantly retreated from view. Then back to the room came the woman, tripping lightly. It seemed as if I could almost hear the click of her little sandals on the polished floor and I imagined that some plaintive song of Japan issued from the softly parted cherry lips to be surprised into silence as she came upon the figure partially concealed next the screen. She must utter a shriek, I thought, and yet I'm sure she smothered one, for the small hands flew up to her mouth and covered it tightly as though she tried to suppress all sound. It flashed through my mind that she did not make outcry fearing lest her lover should return at first signal of her distress and share with her a deadly fate. A look of frightful, unutterable fear overspread the beautiful face and the widening eyes looked pitifully wild and appealing as the wretch rose menacingly from his position and sprang toward her. One sinewy hand curved cruel fingers about the slender throat. She swayed weakly, clutching at the brawny chest and struggling madly to push him from her. The knife — ugh! I shrieked aloud — was thrust deep into that exquisite body and drawn out. A white hand fluttered to the hilt. Again it was plunged deep, deep —

"You fiend! Help! Murder! will no one come!" I screamed, wildly flinging the fan far from me.

"Why, Constance," exclaimed my husband, entering the room at a dead run, "what in the name of all Bedlamites is the matter with you?" but my only response to his question was to fall forward an unconscious heap into his outstretched arms.

When I came to myself, over and over again I tried to explain it all to him, and, although inclined to laugh at me, together we examined the house on the fan, which appeared in its ordinary state of crooked outline, while the face of the earless wretch remained darkly inscrutable and the windows of the dwelling dim.

Finally, after much coaxing and cajoling, I prevailed upon my husband to send the fan, and a letter with it, back to the young officer of the *Octopus*, from whom I had received it.

Weeks lengthened into months, and still no answer came to the missive, and the incident by mutual consent had been buried by us, until one day at luncheon a long, white envelope was handed in by the postman.

"Quick, quick! Richard," I cried excitedly, pouring tea on the tablecloth and diligently sopping it up with a biscuit, "Open it, do! it's from Japan, I can see the postmark from where I sit."

Almost as much interested, if not as much excited as myself, he broke the seal and read aloud to me the following:

DEAR REX:

Tell Mrs. Rex, with my best compliments, that she bids fair to rival Mme. Blavatsky or even the abnormal Ann O'Delia. Joking aside though, old man, that little wife of yours must be endowed with mediumistic powers. That fan was the direct means of aiding in the arrest, and the subsequent putting to death of one Wong Ling Foo, a half-breed Jap, who was responsible for the death of O Yamashiro San, the Japanese wife of Lieut. James Roderick, U. S. N. You met him in Washington in '98. The woman informed her husband of the intended uprising of a certain colony in Nagasaki in the hearing of her murderer, who, being one of the conspirators, and suspecting the woman, to whom he was related, of treason, concealed himself in her apartment during the interview with Lieut. Roderick. When the latter left the house, Wong Ling sprang upon his victim, stabbing her repeatedly, but after leaving her to all appearances dead, she must have managed to scrawl a picture of the wretch, and his name on the fan, trusting that her husband would find it and recognize the man from the peculiar facial deformity, which perhaps you noticed. The fan, however, became the property of the merchant for whom Mrs. Roderick did some decorating, hence your wife's present, which I purchased from the same merchant. I never have taken much stock in the occult, but Mrs. R's vision, dream, or whatever it may be called, is one of the most incomprehensible things that ever happened, and on the strength of it Lieut. Roderick brought that brute of a heathen to justice. Remember me with best regards to your wife, and believe me,

Yours very sincerely,

CHARLES SIBLEY BRIGGS, U. S. N.

The lacquered gong and the little elephant of jade still occupy their places among my treasured bibelots, but I am sure I should have taken no further pleasure in the possession of poor Mrs. Roderick's fan.

Reasons of State.*

BY ARTHUR CHAMBERLAIN.

ARIS never looked finer to me than on the day that I entered it with my life in my hand; I, Jehan de la Montressor, sometime Seigneur of Pierrebas, long a refugee in England from the France of Richelieu, and now back on a mission from My Lord the Duke of Buckingham.

It was a small enough matter in its way — only some half a dozen *billets-doux* from the Duke to the Queen, Anne of Austria; which she, with that lack of caution that oft-times marks the fairest of women, had failed to destroy only to have them slip from her into that engulfing portfolio of which few save His Eminence and Father Joseph knew the secrets.

Now, to come within the power of a mortal and powerful enemy is not without its spice of adventure, but to attack that enemy so suddenly and so sharply as to win both safety and victory, bearing off, unscathed, a coveted prize — that, indeed, is as pretty a game as a man need care to play; and to play it with His Eminence was a condition to satisfy the most exacting. Indeed, as I passed from the sunlit street into the inn of The Three Cats I felt a little qualm pass through me. However, an empty stomach is apt to make one timorous, so I sat down without more ado, calling for meat and drink, while a fellow in the uniform of the Cardinal's men glanced at me from a neighboring table and then went on eating as if it were the main business of his life.

He made such quick work of it that after a few moments he

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* The writer of this story received a cash prize of $100 in THE BLACK CAT story contest ending February 26, 1902.

pushed his trencher from him, swallowed the remaining wine at a gulp and was out of the door and well on his way down the street before the landlord could ask for his reckoning.

"Will Monsieur consider that, now!" exclaimed my host, looking reproachfully after the retreating figure. "A flask of good wine and as much meat as would serve for two ordinary meals, and a poor man dares say nothing! His Eminence —" then he stopped short and looked at me uneasily. "That is," he stammered, "His Eminence would not countenance such doings, but who has time to make the complaint? But see, Monsieur; the knave has left a billet behind him; perchance I wrong him; it may be an order."

I watched the eager little man as he picked up the paper and saw his countenance fall.

"Alas, Monsieur!" he said, holding out the paper to me. It was a letter with a broken seal, duly addressed by the Cardinal himself to no less august a personage than Anne of Austria. "What shall I do with this missive?" my host continued as if struck by a fresh perplexity. "I would not it were found in my possession; I cannot find the knave who has stolen his dinner, and to go to His Eminence with this letter — it were safe for free lodgings in the Bastille!"

Then I took a sudden resolution; *I* would possess myself of that letter, and take what chances there were for good or evil. Very quietly I took it from my perplexed host and tucked it within my doublet.

"Monsieur?" he said, somewhat dubiously; then as he gazed at me more intently a look of awe, almost of terror, came over his face. "Ah, Monseigneur!" he exclaimed, bowing profoundly, "I should have known — I beg ten thousand pardons — I am only too happy to serve freely any one in the employ of Your Eminence — I —" He turned pale as he stood there, looking up into my face with a quivering, deprecatory smile.

"What do you mean, fellow?" I said, half angrily. "I am no Monseigneur! For whom do you take me?"

The landlord bowed obsequiously. "Monseigneur — Monsieur — it is as Monsieur says, of course. But if His Eminence — if Monsieur would deign —"

It came upon me like a flash of lightning; he took me for the great Cardinal himself!

"I am not His Eminence," I said calmly; "but I have taken charge of this letter; so give yourself no further uneasiness concerning it. And now, show me to a room."

"Assuredly, Your Em — I crave pardon — Monsieur." He was shaking his head as he mounted the narrow stairs, and he bowed low as he ushered me into the room. It was clear that he still thought me Richelieu.

Once alone, I considered the curious mistake on the part of the landlord. I was playing a desperate game at best, but thus far I had played it in my own person. If I stooped to disguises I could no longer claim the right of honorable treatment; I should be a spy and entitled to naught save the shortest shrift. Still, I felt that further protestations to the landlord would be useless; if they did not confirm him in his opinion they would set going enough gossip to make my errand practically impossible. I put the matter by for the time being, and went to the window for a breath of fresh air.

I looked down into a fairly large courtyard where a girl was walking to and fro, and as I idly watched her it seemed to me that she was in some deep distress. Her eyes caught mine, whereupon she stretched out both hands with an imploring gesture. I stared at her in amazement and saw her drop down in a little huddled heap, hiding her face in her hands and rocking back and forth as if in agony.

I was fairly young in those days, and much of my own peril went out of my head as I looked down at that sobbing girl in the grim courtyard. It was not enough for me that I had in my keeping the business of a great Duke and the honor of a Queen, not to count so small a thing as my own life; I must needs take on this affair as well. I called for the landlord and led him to the window.

"Can you tell me who that girl is," I demanded bluntly, "and what is the cause of her distress? — for I know that she is distressed."

The landlord stared at me. "Why, as to that, Your Eminence should know —" he began; then seeing the frown on my face, he

went on quickly: "A thousand pardons, Monseign — Monsieur! But — if Monsieur would deign to question the lady herself?"

"Very well!" I said, rising hastily and reaching for my hat and sword; but the landlord gazed at me in open-eyed amazement, so I sat down again. "Send for the girl!" I said shortly; and the landlord bowed and disappeared.

"Your Eminence should know." Once again, then, fortune was to give me a clew to the affairs of the great Cardinal. It was a sufficiently dangerous distinction, but when one is on a forlorn hope a blow more or less scarcely matters.

There was a sound of footsteps in the corridor and I looked up. The landlord ducked and disappeared and the girl came hastily but tremblingly into the room. I closed the door. "Perhaps, Mademoiselle, you will be so good as to tell me the meaning of all this?" I said — and surely I had need enough of information.

"Oh!" she cried, clasping her hands beseechingly, "I am truly sorry that Your Eminence should see me thus! I have tried to conform to the request of Your Eminence, but it is hard — it is hard!"

"I am not His Eminence," I repeated wearily. I had small patience left for comedy, and indeed I feared a tragedy if I did not come to a solution of the riddle.

Distressed as the girl was, I saw a look of scorn curl her lips at my disclaimer. "I crave pardon," she replied in a more composed voice. "I should have been more mindful of the claims of an incognito. I repeat that it is hard. I like not to be used as a bait to lure a gallant gentleman to his ruin."

"May I ask to what gentleman you allude, Mademoiselle?" I said, speaking with all the consideration that I could muster.

"Does Your — is it a command — Monsieur?" she hesitated.

"You may so consider it," I replied briefly.

"Monsieur Jehan de la Montressor."

"And the reason for the step?"

"His knowledge of a secret correspondence."

"The penalty for your refusal?"

"The Bastille."

Well! Fate had dealt me some very pretty cards, but why should this girl, who, after all, seemed to be a mere creature of

the Cardinal, care that one more man went to his doom through her? I must ask another question — and I did not care to ask it tenderly.

"Mademoiselle," I said sharply, "what is Jehan de la Montressor to you?"

Her face quivered. "It was so long ago, Monsieur!" she faltered. "I was a child at Avennes, on the great estate that had been ours for generations. He was our guest, a lad of some twelve years. It was a far cry to Paris, Monsieur!" She smiled a little, wanly. "He was kind to me, this little lad, and the few years between our ages seemed an immense gap to me. I showed him where the berries grew the thickest, he carried me dry-shod over brooks that else I had not dared to cross, and in the evenings we sat with our arms around each other while he told many a tale of Paris, wonderful Paris, and the old grandfather chuckled in the chimney-corner and my mother nodded, well pleased."

My head was in a whirl and my heart was beating wildly. It takes a brave man — aye, and a good one — to face the ghost of his childhood without flinching. And as Blanche du Champfonds spoke, that ghost seemed to reincarnate itself before my eyes. I cleared my throat for speech, but she checked me with a gesture.

"Of all that followed that happy time, Monsieur, it is no need that I speak. My father gave his service and fortune to his King, and when no other thing remained his to give, he gave his life. And I, Monsieur — I, left alone in this great Paris, for my mother followed my father within the year — I fell under your august notice, you gave me your powerful protection, you formed me for your tool, you made me a snare, a scourge, a destroyer of human happiness — and for these things I, Blanche du Champfonds, do hold you, Armand Jean du Plessis, Cardinal de Richelieu, Prince of the Church, in my mortal hate and scorn!"

"Mademoiselle," I said, bowing with great respect, "I have had the honor to tell you that I am not His Eminence; on this point you, and perchance others, are under a strange delusion. Furthermore, Mademoiselle, I am the man whom His Eminence would have you ensnare — I was your companion in childhood — I am Jehan de la Montressor."

The loathing that there was in her face made me redden, de-

spite the honesty of my speech. She laughed a hateful, jeering laugh. "Well may you blush — Monsieur!" she cried scornfully, while a strange delight thrilled me for all her scorn. The little fairy of my childhood seemed a poor thing beside this beautiful girl who thought me Richelieu.

"I see that it is useless for me to repeat my statement, Mademoiselle," I replied, speaking as steadily as I might with the flood of remembrance sweeping over me. "It happens, however, that I am even now on my way to His Eminence, and if you are pleased to accompany me I shall be glad of your guidance. Once in the presence of His Eminence, I trust that your delusion will be dispelled."

"I am entirely at your commands, as you know, Monsieur!" she retorted with a bitter smile.

"Moreover," I went on, "I have this letter, which is in my possession through the carelessness of the messenger. I beg that you will read it."

She glanced over it indifferently. "I thank you for removing any possible doubt as to your identity, Monsieur!" she said coldly. "Had Monsieur Jehan de la Montressor this note in his possession, he would never walk into your den of jackals. Once His Grace the Duke of Buckingham had this note within his coffers, he could treat with His Eminence the Lord Cardinal on equal terms. An amorous prelate! Fie! Fie!"

There was reason enough in what she said, but it misliked me, as a gentleman, to bear away a letter that was none of mine. Moreover, since there were other letters to be obtained if possible, it seemed to me well to make one business of it, and not to take two bites at a cherry. So I merely made my best bow, remarking: "If Mademoiselle is ready, we will start."

"As you will," the girl replied indifferently. She moved along by my side like a shadow, down the staircase and out into the street, drawing her hood over her face while I kept my head bowed, not caring to be taken again for Richelieu.

Arriving at last at our destination, I determined to take a high tone; so, turning to the officer in charge, I demanded immediate audience for Monsieur Jehan de la Montressor and Mademoiselle du Champfonds.

The officer gazed at me with a puzzled expression. "Monseigneur will receive them in his cabinet?" he queried.

"His Eminence will receive us where he pleases," I replied sharply, "but announce us at once!"

The officer made a gesture expressive alike of respectful compliance and absolute bewilderment as he escorted us to the door of that mysterious room, whose air might well have been heavy with the weight of blasting secrets. He gave a perfunctory knock and held the door open for us to enter. I stepped within, followed by Mademoiselle du Champfonds. Then the door closed softly and I looked about me. Save for ourselves, the room was empty.

I gazed for a moment stupidly enough, feeling indescribably at a loss. Mademoiselle du Champfonds drew near the great hearth and eyed the fire pensively. It seemed to me not unlike an oppressive dream.

As we waited thus in silence, I noticed a flutter in the hangings, and suddenly, as if it had entered through a secret door, a strange figure presented itself to my gaze — a man in the costume of a strolling dancer — castagnettes at his belt and his green breeches a-jingle with bells.

"What means this intrusion into the cabinet of His Eminence?" he inquired with more hauteur than his costume bore out.

"If the question is addressed to me," I replied boldly, "I may well retort it upon the questioner. If you do not recognize me as His Eminence there are others who have," for I was in no mood to explain the singular imbroglio to a jackanapes of his sort.

He stared hard at me for a second and smiled as sinister a smile as I had ever seen on mortal face. "I crave your pardon, Monsieur," he said with entire suavity. "I failed to note the curious resemblance — 'like unto a man beholding his face in a glass, who goeth his way and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was' — I trust you are familiar with the original. Mademoiselle du Champfonds!" He spoke her name with harsh abruptness. "Inform this gentleman that he stands in the presence of Richelieu!"

The girl had cowered silent by the fire, but at his command she turned a despairing face towards mine. "Ah, Monsieur," she said brokenly, "I should have believed you, I should have saved

you from this! It is indeed His Eminence the Lord Cardinal whom you see."

"Then," I said, bowing, having resolved to brave the matter out, "I beg to announce myself to Your Eminence as Monsieur Jehan de la Montressor, on business of His Grace the Duke of Buckingham. This constitutes my credentials" — and I tendered him a ring bearing the ducal crest.

"You are sufficiently vouched for, Monsieur," he said. "Proceed."

"May it please Your Eminence," I began, "it has come to the ears of His Grace that you hold certain letters written by him to Her Majesty the Queen. As they are of a private nature, touching on no question of State, he desires that you will return them to him, as a courtesy due from one gentleman to another."

The Cardinal regarded me keenly and coldly. "You will pardon me," he remarked drily, "but it would seem that your English sojourn has taught you more bluntness than address, Monsieur. Furthermore, I cannot congratulate the Duke upon his perspicacity — a clandestine correspondence between an English Duke and a Queen of France is surely a matter for the consideration of a loyal minister. Permit me to terminate a useless discussion, Monsieur."

"One moment, Your Eminence," I replied. "I have given you one message and the answer to it was not unexpected. I have another, however; and, as it relates to your private concerns, I venture to think it will not be without interest."

"I have no private concerns, Monsieur," he answered calmly. "My affairs are merged in those of the State; but give me your message."

"Monseigneur," I replied, quaking a little at my temerity, but thinking that my greatest safety lay in boldness, "I have referred to a private correspondence between Her Majesty and His Grace, the Duke of Buckingham. I hold, as it happens, a letter — a part, it would seem, of another private, or, to use the expression of Your Eminence — clandestine — correspondence with Her Majesty on the part of one whose position, to say the least, is as high as that of His Grace of Buckingham."

His Eminence gently inclined his head. "Your reference is

doubtless to me, Monsieur. We will not quarrel as to expressions. I would be gratified, however, if you would inform me how the letter came into your possession."

I briefly recounted the circumstances.

"A careless knave to do me such disservice! I should have entrusted the letter to a woman! Eh, Mademoiselle?" He addressed Mademoiselle du Champfonds, crouching in silent misery by the hearthstone. "By the bye, Monsieur, if it is not asking too much of your complaisance, might I learn what brought you and Mademoiselle together upon this errand?"

"I saw a woman in distress, Monseigneur," I answered proudly, for I had no mind that he should amuse himself at our expense. "I strove to aid her, as became a gentleman. When I could not convince her of her mistake — that strange delusion that has given me access to your presence — I brought her with me that you yourself might convince her."

"Doubtless you have been successful in the latter enterprise, Monsieur," Richelieu answered dryly. "But since you hold a private letter in your possession — a letter that in no way concerns you — I should be glad to learn the extent of your chivalry; whether, in this matter, I treat with a gentleman worthy of that title, or with a dishonorable knave."

"I might reply, Your Eminence," I retorted, "that private and personal correspondence between a Lord Cardinal and his Queen is quite as much an affair for the consideration of the State — not to say, for the consideration of His Majesty the King — as are the letters that you hold in your possession. If it seems to you an easy matter to cause me to be arrested, standing as I do within your own cabinet, let me remind you that I, myself, am reputed to be the Cardinal in question, and that were the guards to enter, finding the limp form of an unconscious mountebank, I should have little difficulty in withdrawing, perchance with all the letters that I desire. Pardon!" I continued as he flushed at thus being bearded. "This might be my course of action were I, indeed, a knave. Being a gentleman, however, I prefer to act differently." I drew the letter from my doublet. "Here, Monseigneur, is the letter written by you to the Queen; it is returned to you unconditionally."

Richelieu took the letter with a face as expressionless as a sheet of blank paper. He turned towards a portfolio and drew thence a paper which he opened and extended to me: "Read, Monsieur!" he said.

I read. It was a copy of the letter which I had returned to him, and across its face was written: "Seen and approved for reasons of State. Louis."

A thousand wild conjectures danced in my brain, and involuntarily my hand sought my sword-hilt; but my momentary discomposure gave His Eminence his opportunity. A bell rang, and I felt my arms pinioned behind me as the cabinet filled suddenly with armed men. I might have guessed that there was more than one secret entrance to the cabinet of Richelieu!

The Cardinal regarded me, grimly complacent. "Monsieur," he said at last, motioning the guards to set free my arms, "have the goodness to give your sword into the hands of M. de Laudet."

I handed M. de Laudet my sword in silence and, as the guards withdrew at a gesture from Richelieu, Mademoiselle du Champfonds, crushed into immobility until now, flung herself at the feet of the great Cardinal.

"Monseigneur!" she cried, "I entreat you, I implore you, clear me from suspicion in this thing! I surely believed M. de la Montressor to be yourself, or never would I have suffered him to come to this place! You will ask why! Monseigneur, he and I were children together — the thought of him has been the one joy left to me — a sacred joy, the one secret that even you, Monseigneur, did not share! Monseigneur, it shames me to declare it, but you have it now; at last you know why I, who have done your bidding in all things else, stumbled when this thing was required at my hands!"

A look of pity and of pain swept across the proud face that gazed down into hers. "I give you my word as a gentleman, Monsieur," the Cardinal declared, "that Mademoiselle du Champfonds was sincere in rejecting all your protestations concerning your identity."

My heart grew light at his words, for all the ticklishness of my situation, and as he turned again towards the ominous portfolio I stepped up to Blanche du Champfonds and took both her hands in

mine. She blushed, then paled as the voice of Richelieu came between us like a sword.

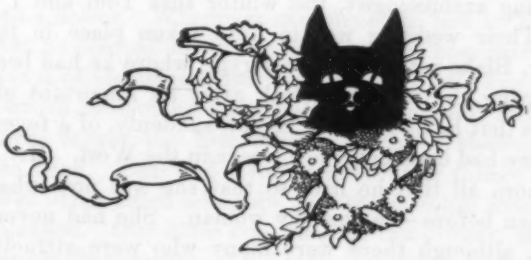
"Monsieur Jehan de la Montressor," he said in measured accents, "I had thought to have your head for an ornament to one of the city gates. But you are a gentleman, Monsieur, and since you have trusted yourself to my honor in place of chaffering with me like a tradesman, here is my answer to your request." He held out to me a package of letters. "Take them, Monsieur," he said. "These are the letters that you have asked of me on behalf of His Grace the Duke of Buckingham. Listen!" he added, seeing that I was about to speak. "You see me caparisoned like a mountebank — bells jingling at my knees and castagnettes at my belt. I have danced before the Queen, Monsieur, and by this time the Court is ringing with the folly of Richelieu. Do you ask the reason for such an act? Read it in the words of His Majesty, written across my letter to the Queen — reasons of State! These letters, that I return to their writer — had I placed them before the King, what then? War, Monsieur. I do not fear war with England, Monsieur, but I do not invite it — for reasons of State. Monsieur, tell the Duke who sent you — madman that he is — that Armand de Richelieu has no private life, no existence, apart from his office. I live but in the welfare of France!"

I gazed at him, towering in his pride; whatever men may think of the sincerity of his defence it had, at least, the audacity of genius.

Once more a shadow crossed his face, but he put it off with a half-scornful smile. "You see, Monsieur, how we plan, and something greater than ourselves brings to pass. Had I not, in my ignorance, set upon your track the woman to whom you are dear — and she need not blush to admit it, you are worthy of her — perchance your body ere now might be stiffening in some gutter of Paris; my agents are a thought hasty at times, Monsieur. You will return to His Grace the Duke bearing these letters — it may be that for the future you will find England more favorable to your life and fortune than France. Mademoiselle du Champfonds will, I think, find England bearable in your society. I place her in your charge, Monsieur. Indeed, having the disposal of her

hand through the favor of His Majesty, I give her to you as a bride, and I wish you both much happiness." He called sharply: "Captain de Laudet! Restore his sword to M. de la Montressor," he continued, as the Captain entered, "and receive him as a friend. He leaves at once as our special messenger to the Duke of Buckingham, and you will see to it that he has every facility at his disposal. This lady accompanies him. A prosperous journey, M. de la Montressor! And to you, Mademoiselle du Champfonds, a good husband and — farewell."

Arm in arm we followed De Laudet from the cabinet of Richelieu, down long staircases and through great salons, saluted by guards and lackeys as we passed. I went forth to life and liberty, my errand accomplished and my bride won to boot, but in all my joy I could scarcely call myself the victor; the triumph, I felt, lay with Richelieu.



A Spiritual Affinity.*

BY MARGARET MERRIWELL.

"SO at last," I exulted to Tom, as we dressed to drive to the station, "I'm going to bring them together! Now if only Honora and Dick will — will see as much in each other as *we* see in *them*, and — take a house somewhere near us!"

"You women!" Tom exclaimed.

We had been married six years, Tom and I, and after spending the first two in New York had come out here to Denver to live. Honora Holcombe was our most intimate friend in the East. She and I had been cronies since our days of tin dishes and dolls. As a child, Honora's slender grace and mop of wavy gold hair had been the standard by which I measured the beauty of all other children; and time, which had changed so many ideals, had not altered this one. As a woman, her beauty was the standard by which I measured other women.

Honora was engaged to be married to Stephen Blake, the brilliant young archæologist, the winter that Tom and I left New York. Their wedding was to have taken place in the spring, when Mr. Blake returned from Egypt, where he had been obliged to be during the winter to look after an important excavation. The news that he had died in Egypt, suddenly, of a fever, reached us after we had been but a few weeks in the West. Mr. Blake had left Honora all that he had, so that she was now what she had never been before — a wealthy woman. She had never married, however, although there were many who were attracted by her beauty and wealth. Ever since Stephen Blake's death she had been promising us a visit, but one thing and another had kept her from coming out to Colorado. Four days before the one of which I speak I received a telegram, and by five o'clock that September afternoon — it was then a quarter of, by Tom's watch on the

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dresser — the train that was bringing her to us would be in. The carriage that was to take us to meet her was waiting below.

And Dick — Dick Gardner — was our most intimate friend in the West. We had known him only a year, but time, our meeting with Dick had convinced us, was not always essential to friendship. He had come to be part of our life, a very large part of it, and Tom and he were planning to go into business together before many months. I was as anxious for this new bond as was Tom, feeling that it would draw us, if such were a possible thing, even closer together. And ever since Dick had made us, as Tom said, "a trio instead of a couplet," I had cherished a dream. Delightful as had been the "trio" there yet was a finishing touch — we might be a "quartet." If only my beautiful girl! It was my first and only venture. I had always loathed matchmaking, and had declared that I never would stoop to it, but just this was needed to make life quite perfect — "we four and no more!"

Had I told them too much of each other? I asked myself on the way to the station. My heart was all in a flutter, now my dream had its chance to come true. Dick at least — we had had so many long chats together — knew nearly all that I myself knew of Honora. Honora had heard a good deal, in my letters, of Dick. I wondered, with a thrill, if in these four years Honora had changed.

Honora *had* changed. The bud, since we had seen her, had opened into a flower. Whenever she turned to talk to Tom, or to look at what he pointed out to her, on the drive homeward, I stole at her a glance of almost unbelieving delight. Could any man look at her, I strove to demand impartially, and not fall at her feet? I shall never forget the first evening, when I showed her, in triumph, to Dick. Tom and I found a world of things to say to one another. Tom acted adorably, and the evening went off just as I had planned. Our little den, back of the library, is adapted to bringing people together. One may sometimes find an affinity in an hour, among Oriental cushions, where it would take months to discover it elsewhere. And with two such souls as Dick's and Honora's, between whom to find the affinity — altogether, it seemed to me, the circumstances were at their best.

Honora was attracted, I could see. Could any woman look at

our Dick, I asked myself, and not admire him? Great, broad-shouldered Dick, with his interesting face and kind eyes? And as for Dick — I was sure of him after the first half-hour.

Well, I lay low, day by day, and helped it along. I went softly, but my heart was high. And Tom didn't do anything out of the way, nor make any break. I had an idea that he was interested in this particular bit of matchmaking himself.

Dick came in nearly every night. As I said, one could easily see that it was all over with Dick from the first. Honora was harder to read. I fancied that I knew of whom she was thinking, however, when she stood at her mirror. Had any instinct forewarned her when she chose those creations in rose and turquoise and shadowy gray? She wore them, at least, with the care that a woman takes for the man that she loves, — every night with some bewildering change. There were "signs of the times." When she spoke, even though she did not address him, it always seemed to me that it was to Dick she was speaking; and when she sang I was sure it was to Dick that she sang. She must have known that no man could resist her as she stood with her bright head thrown back. I had known her too long to think that she would play with such a man, and our friend. And at last there came a night when I was sure of them both.

We had come in from the theatre, we four, and Dick and Honora stood by the fireplace in the library. We had walked home, as it was such a crisp, glorious night, — Dick and Honora ahead. Tom and I sat on the settle on the opposite side of the room, and straightened our gloves. We were tired, I suppose, for none of us spoke. Honora leaned against the mantel with her cheek on her palm. There was a little blaze of wood in the grate. She looked at the fire, and Dick looked at her.

"I suppose I must go," he said at last, to her, not to us. He looked at his watch in an absent-minded way.

"Must you?" Honora asked in a far-away voice. She looked up and swayed a bit toward him. She, too, seemed to have forgotten that there was anyone else in the room.

Dick slipped back the watch and turned toward her, and at the same moment Honora stretched out her hands. He clasped them — and then they both appeared to realize that Tom and I were there. Honora gave an odd little laugh.

"I — wanted to see the charm on your watch-chain," she faltered, to hide her confusion. "It is a curious thing."

Tom and I stepped up to help them, and made talk and looked at the charm. It was a rather curious thing — a little mottled stone of an odd shape, traced over with what appeared to be meaningless lines. It hung on the chain close to the watch. I had seen it, but had never thought to mention it before. Honora held the watch and charm on her palm.

"Where did you get it?" she asked.

"Looks like an amulet," Tom put in, turning it over. "It has its story, I suppose."

Dick smiled, and took it quietly back. "It both is an amulet and has its story," he answered, "though it's rather too late to tell it tonight. It was my mother's — a little thing she always used to carry. The last thing she gave me!" he said.

Dick was always so sweet when he spoke of his mother. It pleased me to have it happen just then. I saw Honora look at him. She had reverenced hers.

"Tom, dear," I whispered, — I caught him around the neck, in the hall, and gave him a kiss in the dark, — "I think we can speak for that house!" Tom patted me back. He was every bit as much pleased as was I.

I slipped into Honora's room, a little later. She stood by the mirror and brushed out her hair. I curled up on the divan and began to take the pins out of mine. I didn't dare trust myself to speak to her — my heart was too full.

"Edna," she said at last, without turning around, "did you say that Tom and Mr. Gardner were going into business together this fall?"

"Yes, dear," I answered, and waited. There was a silence, while she braided her yellow hair slowly down.

"And what — how much capital — will Tom put into the business?" she asked.

It gave me, I must confess, a curious chill. Was she already so jealous for Dick?

"Every cent that he has," I made answer. For the moment I was inclined to be rather disloyally hurt.

Honora crossed the room and knelt down beside me. She drew

me to her and pressed her cheek against mine. If I had been hurt it was all over then. I knew she had not meant to wound me. She loved me, she loved Tom, too well. "Dick's interests are ours, dear," I whispered, while my arm held her close. "We think more of him than of any one else in the world — except you!"

She slipped away from me, and I left her there, with her arms on the divan, and her head on her arms. I stroked her hair to show her that I understood and was glad, and stole away softly — that I might not intrude between her and her joy.

Dick came in the next night as usual. I had sent around in the afternoon to ask him to make a fourth at whist that evening, that it might be as easy as possible both for him and Honora. He looked and acted quite like himself, but Honora was very quiet, having been in her room with a headache all day. She had told me nothing, and I had asked no questions, being content to wait until she, or Dick, should be ready to speak. Had they not told me, the night before, all that my heart desired? When Honora came into the den that evening, where we three were waiting at the card-table, she drew the red curtain over the little opening that divided us from the library, and sat down with her back to it, in the chair opposite Dick. She wore a white gown, and the glowing color behind her made her look rather pale. But had she ever been so truly "every inch a queen"?

Our talk drifted around to spiritualism, after one or two games of whist. The den is a place that will never allow people who have ideas to exchange to play cards very long. It was a remark of Honora's that turned us into the channel of which I have spoken. Tom and Dick were always ready to talk on the subject. Tom had been around to the spiritualist meetings in Denver a good deal with Dick, who had a regular genius for exploiting the tricks of the trade, and they both told some of their stories.

Had any of us ever been to what is called a "materializing séance"? Honora inquired. One in which the spirits really took shape? Tom said that he had, but that it was nothing that could be called the real thing. Dick said he had not.

Had she? we asked.

Yes, once, she replied, and of course we all pressed her to tell.

Dick asked if he might smoke, and Honora handed him a match-box that Stephen Blake had sent us, from the tabouret beside her. I remember so well every little thing that happened in the den that night.

It was in the East, about two years ago, she said. She was then in New York State, as we knew, with her aunt Mrs. Fisher, and the place where they were staying was near Lake Onondaga, where the spiritualists had a camp. Mrs. Fisher had a great deal of curiosity in regard to spiritualism, and had insisted on taking her, one evening, to one of the meetings at the Lake. She herself had always had a horror of such things, Honora said, but this séance was to be a private one, and Mrs. Fisher had paid a good deal for the tickets. So, of course, she went. It was to be what she had spoken of — a "materializing séance." I remembered while she was telling us the story that Honora had mentioned in a letter having gone to a séance while at Onondaga. Merely that.

It was much the sort of thing that we had heard described before. The affair was held, Honora said, in a little room in one of the pavilions at the Lake. After the people in the audience — some twenty-two or three — had satisfied themselves that it would be impossible for the spirits to get in, unless they came in by the key-hole, the room was darkened and the spirits — appeared.

She could see them, although very indistinctly, owing to the darkness, she told us in answer to our questions — of course we had quite a few to ask. They looked like shadowy men and women. There seemed to be a number — she could hardly tell how many — in the room. She was not frightened, only very curious. No one, of course, even the most skeptical, could help feeling a little weird about it. It was without any doubt an eerie sight.

It was a fake, of course, Tom said.

Tom's interest in the spiritualists was confined to showing up their tricks. He and Dick prided themselves, as I have said, in seeing through them. Tom gave a very likely theory of how it had been done. I remarked, I believe, that I would like to go, if such a séance ever came to Denver. Dick seemed to be lost in thought.

"Yes," Honora said, "I was convinced it was a fake."

Were we to have another game? I asked. Tom seemed to have finished talking. I laid the cards before Honora, and asked if she would cut.

"We sat on the front row of seats, my aunt and I," she went on, without replying. "My seat was the one on the end, next to the aisle. Several of the spirits came up to people in the audience and held out their hands. One, a man, *my* 'spiritual affinity,' I suppose, came up to *me*."

"You took his hand?" Tom exclaimed, delighted. "Good!"

"No," Honora answered, "he offered me his arm. I took his arm and we walked a step or two. It was a real man's arm. I proved to myself, if I had ever had a doubt about it, that it was a fake."

I glanced, while Tom was asking questions about the spirit arm, I could scarcely have told why, at Dick. I wondered, if I could have put it into words, why Honora should have chosen just this story, to tell at just this time. Perhaps it was only I to whom it seemed the least bit out of tune.

"The only thing in all of it that puzzles me," Tom said, "is how these fakers manage to continue fooling people as they do, — in spite of everything that's published and shown up. It's odd!"

Dick drew a long breath and reached for another match. His cigar, during Honora's story, had gone out. He raised a little cloud of smoke about us.

"Odd," he said.

Honora straightened the pack of cards that lay before her on the table. I can see her long, white fingers, smoothing them this way and that. I must make this part of my story very brief.

"Yes," she repeated slowly, without looking up, "it's odd. But I haven't told you yet the oddest part!

"Just before Mr. Blake died," she went on, "— the gentleman to whom I was engaged, —" she said, with a glance across at Dick, "he sent me a little gift from Egypt. The last he ever sent!"

I leaned a little forward. Tom leaned forward, too. I remember wondering if Honora's head were worse — she looked so very pale.

"It was a bracelet of gold links," she said, "and the clasp was

made of two halves of a little stone that Mr. Blake had found in his latest excavation. He had the stone carved. The tracing on the two halves when they came together made a serpent — he meant it as the symbol of eternity, a sign of the endurance of our love. My 'spiritual affinity' at the séance that night," she continued quietly, "took the bracelet from my wrist. That is, he took the half of it. It broke, in our struggle in the dark!"

There was a little clink as she threw something down before us, on the table. I saw her stretch out her hand across it, through the blur that the swinging-lamp above us suddenly made before my eyes, to Dick.

"May I trouble you for the charm on your watch-chain, Mr. — Gardner? *The one that was your mother's?*" she asked.

I could hear Tom's heavy breathing. I saw, through the blur, Dick lay his watch-chain in her hand.

Honora pushed it, with the broken bracelet on the table, over to Tom, and he fitted the stone on the watch-chain to the stone in the bracelet-clasp with shaking hands. I leaned over. I did not yet fully understand.

The meaningless lines on the two halves of the stone, when they were brought together, made a serpent.

When we lifted our heads Dick was gone.

The Black Roses.*

BY ANNA McCLURE SHOLL.

THE bareness of the lofty frescoed room had been relieved by hangings of ancient tapestry where was portrayed in dim green tints, as of sea depths, the story of Circe. Swinging lamps and yellow candles, thick as a man's wrist, in tall, ecclesiastical candlesticks, cast a soft light o'er the sombre antique furniture. Great brass bowls of red roses made splashes of color in the deep shadows.

In a high carved arm-chair, by the open wood-fire a woman sat, listening and waiting. She wore a loose gown of a soft, diaphanous material, whose whiteness was thrown into relief by the mantle of black fur, just slipping from her shoulders. She, herself, was of a strange type of beauty, the clear pallor of her skin, like the petal of a white rose, being in vivid contrast to her jet black hair and dark eyes. She might have served to personify night.

After a time she arose and paced the room restlessly, pausing at the great tapestried bed to turn down the coverlet, and to touch with her lips an instant the violets just beneath the ebony-and-ivory crucifix at the bed's head. Then she drew aside the curtains of a window, and looked out for a moment on the moonlit garden, and on the lights of Florence, far below in the valley. They had lived in the villa already three months, she and her husband, yet in that time they had visited the beautiful city but once. He was absorbed in his chemical experiments, and she was absorbed in him.

She heard his step now in the corridor, and her heart leaped with expectancy. He entered and stood for a moment in the shadow, a youthful figure still, despite his bent shoulders and furrowed brow, and the look of age imparted by the skull-cap and long furred coat which he wore.

For a moment she could not see what he carried in his arms,

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but she divined from his air of exaltation that his latest experiment had been successful. As she crossed the room, a graceful figure in her long white draperies, he held out to her his precious burden, twelve coal-black roses. She gave a cry of delight.

"Oh, how beautiful! Basil, how did you do it?"

He smiled as he watched her caress the ebony petals with her white finger tips, and brush their soft blackness against the pale oval of her cheek.

"That I cannot tell any one — even you! You wished for a black rose. Your husband is a magician," he went on playfully, "and you have your heart's desire!"

She sank into the arm-chair by the fire, the roses on her lap, a dark mass against the delicate tissues of her robe. Here and there the firelight caught the intense green of the unchanged foliage.

"What are they like?" she cried, holding one against her face. "They are witch-flowers now, uncanny midnight things. Ah! I know. They are like the soul of Lucrezia Borgia."

Her husband adjusted the black fur mantle about her shoulders.

"No, no, you must not call them ugly names, sweetheart, for I mean them to personify you. You are a dark rose — with your midnight hair and eyes."

"'Du bist wie eine Blume'? Ah, the poet never thought of such a flower, I'm sure. They misnamed me who called me Rosamond. But tell me, Basil, did you have to mingle a great many poisons to produce this effect?"

"Yes, a great many. But they have annulled each other, though they destroyed the rose perfume in the process."

"The loss is slight. I love them, these black roses. They fascinate me. Suppose I should decorate the wayside shrine with them at the garden gate!"

"The peasants would stone you for a witch, I fear. No, Rosamond, keep them in your bed-chamber."

"I shall put them by my bed now, and ring for Santuzza to take away these other flowers. I want my black roses to reign alone."

She crossed the room, and from an inlaid cabinet took out a fantastically carved vase of rich green malachite. In this she arranged the roses.

"How heavy they are! One would think they were overbur-

dened. How well they suit the vase! They shall give me rare dreams! You are not going back to the laboratory? It is past midnight. Isn't this achievement enough for one day?"

"Dearest, I have another experiment still uncompleted. Go to your rest and dream of your roses."

He kissed her and went away, his footsteps echoing along the stone corridors that led to the laboratory. She stretched herself upon the bed, and lay for a long time between sleeping and waking, the light from a swinging lamp falling across her face, one heavy black rose just brushing the pure whiteness of her cheek.

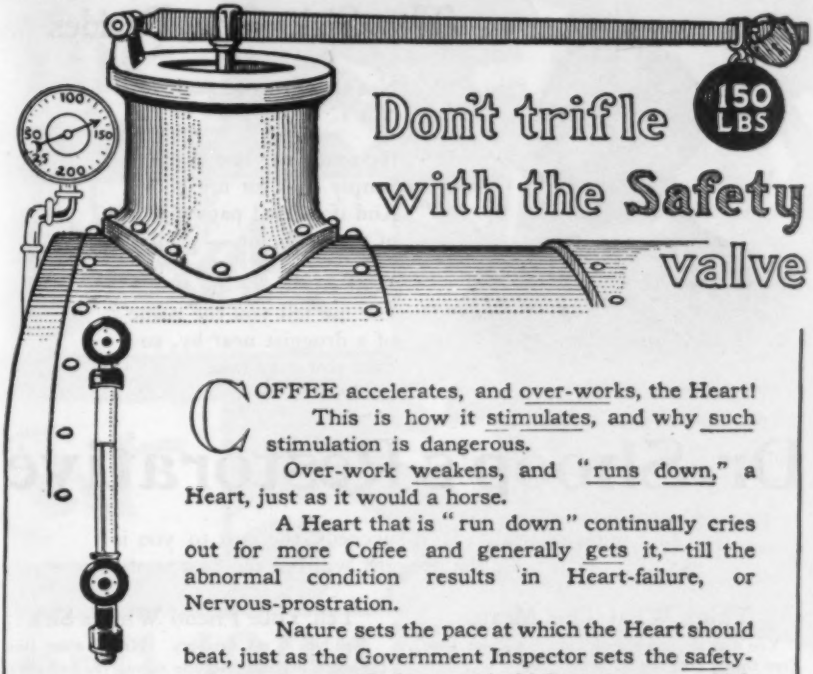
Her husband worked in his laboratory until the morning sun was gilding the domes and towers of Florence. Tired out at last, by a prolonged and unsuccessful experiment, he left his work to go to his bedroom. As he passed his wife's room he saw that the door was ajar. He reached out a hand to close it, lest the morning sounds through the house should disturb her; but in the act he caught a glimpse of something by her bed which made him turn faint with a sudden nameless horror. The roses in the malachite vase had become white again, and were gleaming ghostly in the pale radiance of the swinging lamp. Knowing the nature of the poisons imprisoned — he had thought forever — in the black roses, a terrible fear possessed him. In making their escape from those petals, now of innocent pallor, where had they gone!

"Rosamond!" His voice shook as he called her name.

There was no answer.

"Rosamond! Rosamond!"

His tones were now loud and terrified. No answer came from the dark shadow of the bed. He drew nearer, cold with apprehension. Something very black was outlined against the whiteness of the linen. A great horror sickened him. For an instant he paused, shaking as with ague. He dared not go nearer, dared not look. What was this in the bed! By a supreme effort he reached the window-curtain, and pulled it aside. The morning light streamed in, revealing the form of his wife, quite dead, and black as if carved out of ebony.



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